DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 098 246 SP 008 609

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TITLE Life! Through Play.
PUB DATE 16 Nov 74
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented to the Wyoming Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (Laramie, Wyoming, November 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Athletics; *Definitions; Games; Literature Reviews; *Physical Education; *Play; Self Actualization; Self Concept

ABSTRACT

This speech presents a review of research concerning the nature of play. Some of the formal characteristics of play are: (a) it is distinct from ordinary life in its "temporariness" and its limitless location; (b) there is an element of tension in play that leads to uncertainty concerning the outcome but at the same time provides the opportunity to test the player's prowess against the rules of the game; (c) even though it is removed from real life, play is quite serious; and (d) play is a voluntary activity that is spontaneous and pleasurable. Informal aspects of play are also cited as described by various writers. The reason man plays is an inner "need" to play--to seek meaning in life by testing himself, by being free with himself, by seeing what is inside himself. The author gives the following reasons as to why the concept of play is important for physical educators: (a) if physical education programs are to contribute to the well-being of children, youth, and adults, then any program of sports and games must be infused with the joyful inner-directed play element; (b) if the need for integration and self-actualization is so great in our society, and if games and sport can enhance the possibility of man's self-awareness, then a basic task of physical education must be to maximize the opportunities for these types of occurrences. (JA)

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ED 098245

LIFE! THROUGH PLAY

by

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Paper presented to the Wyoming Association for Health,
Physical Education and Recreation

Laramie, Wyoming
16 November 1974

SPWB 609

LIFE! THROUGH PLAY

My reasons for wanting to talk to you about play spring from several sources. First of all it is fun to talk about! It is something that we are all familiar with, something we have experienced. It is something which lies at the very core of our persons and of our professional lives. It is something about which we can dialogue and communicate because we have all had some considerable experience as "players." But there is another reason for talking about play, and that stems from a feeling of concern. I am concerned that as a people we have not developed the potential of play in our lives. I am concerned that the naturalness of play that we know as a part of our childhood seems to get trampled on very early in life and often fails to follow us into maturity. I am concerned that our culture refuses to take play seriously, that we ignore or consciously reject it as a vehicle which gives meaning and substance to our lives. I am concerned that our profession is not as aware as it might be of the role it can play in reviving and developing play in our society. And finally, I am concerned that as a profession we are apt to apologize for the fact that we are engaged in something so apparently worthless as play.

What is play? An attempt to analyze it is perhaps foolhardy and even dangerous! Because, when we set out to define it we take the risk of obscuring and even losing the very essence of what it is. However, from all that has been written about play (and it is voluminous) we find that it has a number of identifiable elements.

First of all, play is not "ordinary" or "real" life. Rather, it is a stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity. It is distinct from "ordinary" life both in locality and in duration. In terms of duration we note

that play begins, and all at once it is "over." It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress it is movement and change, and once it is played it endures as a newly-found creation -- a treasure to be retained. It can be repeated. Huizinga (7) says it this way: "Play is an interlude in daily life, it adorns it, it complements it and to that extent it is necessary for the individual and for the culture." Fink (6) agrees with Huizinga relative to the time element of play. He says that "play affords a type of temporal present." It is not the kind of "present" in which we "calm the depths of our soul, or sense the eternal peace of the world -- play is activity, and creativity, and yet it is close to eternal things." He goes on to say "play interrupts the continuity and purposive structure of our lives. It is a strange oasis, and enchanted rest spot in man's agitated journey and never-ending flight. It may seem at a distance and unrelated to our normal life." This is not so! "It relates in a very meaningful way, in its mode of representation. Play represents, and confronts death, work, love, struggle. It absorbs all. We play at being serious, play at truth, we play reality, we play work and struggle, we play love and death, and we even play play itself."

So, we see that play is distinct from ordinary life in its time characteristic, its "temporariness." But it is also distinct from ordinary life in its location. All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand, either materially or ideally, but deliberately marked off. All "spots" of play are temporary worlds within the ordinary world. Inside the playground we see an absolute and peculiar order reign. Play creates order, it is order. It demands order absolute and supreme because if we deviate from this we spoil the game.

It is interesting to note that it is the "order" characteristic of play that causes it to be likened to aesthetics. Huizinga (7) in his classic work, Homo

Ludens, (Man Playing) says that play tends to assume marked elements of beauty, and "in play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms play is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perception known to man." He goes on to say that the terms we use to characterize play are also the terms used to describe the effects of beauty. Among these are the notions of tension, poise, balance, rhythm and harmony. The tension element in play is an interesting one and one we can readily understand. It is this element in play that we recognize as uncertainty, a chanciness, a striving to decide the issue. It is also this element that imparts an ethical value to play insofar as it means testing of a player's prowess, that is, his courage, tenacity, resources and his spiritual powers. In short, his "fairness." It is understood that the player must stick to the rules because they are absolutely binding and there is no doubt among the players as to what they are. Play then is marked by its order, by its location, and by its particular aesthetic qualities.

It might well be thought at this point that if play is not "real life," if it is "only pretending" then it cannot possibly be serious. It is quite the opposite. It is most serious in that it is totally absorbing and the player reflects a devotion that passes into rapture. Rahner (17) in his book Man at Play says that the play element in serious activity increases as the activity becomes more serious. He cites this example: "The race of two great world powers into space, in its most serious aspects, is quite obviously play, stylized competition, agonia -- that is why it is thought of all over the world as a "race," a sporting event. It is no accident that the most strenuous corporate technological effort which man has ever made coincides in fact with the activity which earlier man often jokingly imagined to be the most playful, the most pointless (play is aimed at nothing

outside itself) of all activities, spontaneous to the point of being totally ridiculous: shooting for the moon." To continue with the notion of seriousness in play Patsy Neal in her book Sport and Identity (13) describes play as risk, challenge, creativeness, caring, involvement, total being. It is quite impossible to even think of these as "non-serious" human endeavors.

A second element of play is that of voluntary activity. Play is spontaneous! When one is ordered to play, it is no longer spontaneous, or pleasureable but rather a forcible imitation of play. Play is superfluous and for the adult it is a function which we could leave alone if we wanted. The need to play is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time -- it is never imposed by physical necessity, or moral duty. It is never a task, it is done at leisure, at free time. Play is free. In fact it is freedom. In this respect Piaget would say that play is an activity "for pleasure," while serious activity (which is not to imply that play is not serious) is directed towards a useful result irrespective of its pleasureable character. However, this can confuse the issue for much "work" properly so called has no other subjective end than satisfaction or pleasure, and yet it is not play.

Thus we have identified some of the formal elements of play: it is spontaneous and pleasureable; it has its own time and space. Although the following may not be classified as formal elements of play, they are factors worth noting and help us to develop a broader conception of it. Neal points out the creativity aspect. She says "play is creation, because participation is resulting in the creation of something. The performer creates from what he is, and what comes from his involvement in sport is a result of what type of person he is in reality." She goes on to say that play gives one a chance for open and boundless joy, for

fluidity of movement, for instant reaction under stress, and a sense of control over mind and body. Play exemplifies man's search for perfection -- man plays to seek meaning to who and what he is."

David Miller in Gods and Games (4) describes play as a "purposeful purposelessness." He says that "play is an affirmation of life, not an attempt to bring order out of chaos, or to suggest improvement in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we are living (which is so excellent once one gets ones mind and ones desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord)".

Estes (from his doctoral dissertation "Nothing-Doing: A Study of Games-Play Motifs in the Literature of Samuel Beckett) (5) says that "play becomes a way of going on in a world in which all reasons for action have evaporated, in which the worth of action is itself questioned, in which there is nothing to be done. Play becomes a mode of doing nothing, a mode of action freed from the teleological hypotheses."

Rahner (17) describes play as it relates to work. He says "Play is at least half of life. Play and work derive from the same source in man's life world. Where work and play coincide, learning (and life) is maximal." He goes on to say that we understand play more clearly by contrasting it with work because "work is what is not play, and play is that which work is not -- almost." The best players in any game turn out to be the professionals (the game is work, a livelihood) and the best workers in any field are those for whom their work is a kind of play." Work is like play, free in a sense that it truly comes from within, comes as a realization of human potential. Furthermore, "work is an expression of freedom and joy, but this is what play itself is."

In the book Game, Play, Literature Fink (6) notes that play is frequently described as "purposeless" or "undirected" activity. "This is not the case. Considered as a whole it is purposive, and each individual phase of play action has its own specific purpose, which is an integral part of the whole." He goes on to point out that "the immanent purpose of play is not subordinate to the ultimate purpose served by all other human activity. Play has only internal purpose, unrelated to anything external to itself." Thus whenever we "play for the sake of" something else, such as "physical fitness" for example, or for "health," play has been perverted and has become merely a means to an end. Fink concludes that human play "is the symbolic act of representing the meaning of the world and of life."

In a book called In Tune With The World Pieper (16) writes that "play is a liberation. Through it the player becomes aware of, and may enter the greater reality which gives a wider perspective on the world of everyday work, even as it supports it. In playing man passes beyond the barriers of the present life on earth."

Bob Richards (12), the famous preacher-pole vaulter, says that "sport is not removed from the complexities and problems of life, it is in fact a world of reality. Play is a world that exposes all a person is, in mind, and body, heart and spirit. The sport world frequently provides the most genuine encounter with the problems of living."

Kelty in a talk on "Purity of Heart and Humility - Play" (8) describes it in this way: "Play is not acting, but a mode of action. It is not pretending, but a protection from pretense. Play is not work, but is a background for work. It is not life, but a way of living. It is a form or style of being." Further he

feels that real play includes an element of the spiritual and uses the example of the play of negro slaves. He says, "where has come the only spiritual music of any significance that this land has produced to date? Where has come the most beautiful of our folk songs? You know as well as I that they have come from the play of negro slaves doing wretched hard labor and transforming it into spiritual significance, accompanying it with music and song that no man has ever heard, and been able to forget." He concludes that "this is perhaps one of the finest examples of spiritual play that our land has ever known."

Up to this point it may seem that the issue of "why" man plays has been sidestepped! Consciously ignored! This is partially true. There are numerous theories put forward on why man plays, but one wonders if it is necessary to press the point? Does there have to be a logical reason for why we play? Man plays because he is human, he has a "need" to play -- he seeks meaning in life, and the only way to find meaning is to test himself to see what is <u>there</u>. In play man opens himself to his being, tests it, either conquers it or he doesn't, but in the process experiences the thrill that comes in the confrontation and discovery of self. There are no simple answers to the question of why man plays, but at least in part it seems to be our attempt to touch on life without getting fatally burned by going near the fire. Play allows us to come in contact with life as we would like it to be if we dared take the chance <u>for real</u>. We <u>play</u> at being lots of things, we <u>play</u> at being daring, at being strong, at being brave. And in games we allow ourselves to say "why not" -- this gives us the opportunity to risk, to test ourselves without losing anything, or having anything of great value at stake. Play allows us to be foolish, free, and we find here a dimension of self that cannot be otherwise found. Huizinga says that to use "instinct" as a reason for play isn't enough --

it explains nothing. Play is more than a physiological phenomena, or psychological reflex. It is a significant function of man. Furthermore he goes on to say that there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action: all play means something. It seems as though all theories of play start from the assumption that play must serve something, and they do not inquire into the meaning of play to the player. Also, most theories attempt to attach play with quantitative methods of experimental research without first paying attention to the profoundly aesthetic quality of play. But what in fact is true is there is a "fun" element which is characteristic of all play, and the "fun" of playing resists all analyses and all logical interpretations.

It is easy to see then that we don't have to struggle with the question of "why" man plays, but simply acknowledge the fact that he does! Perhaps a more important question is why doesn't man play? Why doesn't play interest our contemporary society more than it does? Why is it that we do not give play a value beyond pleasure? Why is it that, as Kelty (8) suggests, we are a culture, a people who does not know how to play? Why is it that we stifle and frustrate the need to play in our lives as we travel into maturity? Although there may not be a single answer to these disturbing questions we can get some feeling for the problem by examining some of the reasons for man not developing his ability to play.

Kretchmer and Harper (9) suggest that "perhaps man ~~insists~~ intuits that play is somehow an irrational activity. He often plays for no good reason, yet he cannot it seems, let himself live with this fact. Play (it seems) becomes acceptable when man can explain his activity on rational grounds. The rational then is superimposed on the irrational."

In the sports world we find one of the most natural settings for play, and yet our sports world has pushed the individual away from the joys of inner being and encourages him to go after the external values emphasized by our society.

Rahner (17) says that one reason play doesn't interest our contemporary world as much as it should is because of our concept of freedom. You will remember that one of the elements of play is its "free-ing" quality. He feels that we conceive of freedom as something grim, something to be fought for, something we feel may confront us with antagonism and even hatred, instead of infusing us with spontaneity and joy. By the fact that we do not associate freedom with play, we tend to outlaw it. It strikes us then as inconsequential, beneath the adult's dignity, something childish.

Another reason that play is not valued today is because of the western world's puritanical view that play and learning are not synonymous. Play in our culture has been positioned versus learning, and versus work. Play is thought of more or less as frivolous, and as pleasureable nonsense. It is seen as an escape from reality into a dream utopia. As long as we continue to naively use the popular antitheses of work-play, frivolity-seriousness, and the like we will never grasp the ontological meaning of play. If we define play in the usual manner, by contrasting it with work, reality, seriousness and authenticity, we falsely juxtapose it with other existential phenomena. Play <u>is</u> basic existential phenomena. It is just as primordial as death, love, and work, but it is <u>not</u> bound to these phenomena.

This then brings us to the question of what all of this means personally, professionally, culturally? There is always the yearning in each of us to have someone tell us: "this is what can and must be done about the issue!" Or, it is tempting

for someone like me to say: "this is what you ought to do about it!" I can identify with the former, and shall attempt several suggestions relative to the latter.

First of all I think that if we truly believe that physical education programs contribute to the well-being of children, of youth and adults, then any program of sport or games must always be thoroughly infused with the joyful inner-directed play element. Sports in the physical education curriculum must contribute to the development of unity and harmony for each participant. As Park (14) says "most of us have experienced through some type of physical activity that insight which has been referred to as the "peak experience" -- that moment, however fleeting, when one becomes transcendently self-actualized and after which one's life is somehow a little richer and fuller." Let us not deny the opportunity of that experience in those with whom we work!

Secondly I think that if the need for integration and self-actualization is so great in our society, and if games and sport can enhance the possibility of man's self-awareness, then a basic task of physical education must be to maximize opportunities for these types of occurrences.

And finally, is the suggestion that sport must be kept truly playful. We must place less emphasis upon the external forms and patterns of sport (the rules, the structures, the strategies) and must instead "keep these man-made impositions in a proper perspective while devoting more of our energies to providing the kinds of sports environments in which participants have the greatest opportunity to develop the inner strengths and awarenesses which will enable them to become truly complete, harmonious individuals." (14) This is not to say that efforts to achieve performance excellence are debasing, or unworthy! What is suggested is that too much

emphasis on the external symbols of sports will only divert our vision and detract from the more valuable human experiences which could be achieved.

In conclusion then, I think we have a most unusual, unique opportunity in our profession of games and sport to develop and refine true play, noble play in our society. Let us not overlook this opportunity. For after all, man experiences life through play!

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